

The Revolutionary-turned-Economist

Albert Winsemius Chair Professor Ng Yew Kwang remembers his heady days as a student activist in Malaysia.

By Chua Yini



NTU's Albert Winsemius Chair Professor Ng Yew Kwang was a recipient of the Distinguished Fellow award, the highest recognition from the Economic Society of Australia.

Fifteen-year-old Ng Yew Kwang stood in a packed hall in Pin Hwa High School in Penang, his spirits lifted by the presence of his comrades who had rallied together to fight for socialist ideals. Almost a thousand people from four Chinese schools were squeezed into the tiny area; they sang songs and made speeches.

It was a particular day in 1957, the heyday of the Communist student protest movement in Malaya. Ng was a member of a left-wing group in school.

The police surrounded the area and ordered the students to leave. But Ng and his comrades refused. Suddenly, shots were fired, the windows came crashing down, a mist began to gather and swirl around the packed hall. Chaos ensued as people started to cough and scream in pain.

Fifty years on from the incident, Ng still remembers how it is like to have tear gas fired at oneself.

"Initially, we felt very excited. But after a while, no one could stand it. It's unbearable," said 70-year-old Ng, now a Professor of Economics in NTU. He recounted his young days with a wistful smile.

In his teens, Ng was active in the left-wing student movement at Han Chiang High School in Penang. He took part in strikes and demonstrations and attended secret meetings to organise such activities.

But he now believes that economics is the best engine of change.

"I gave up my revolutionary dream to become an economist," Ng said. "I believed that communism could change society for the better. But my education in the university, and the events in China and Russia gradually convinced me otherwise."

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His revolutionary dream may be gone, but his desire to make a difference remains.

Ng graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from Nanyang University in 1966 and obtained a PhD in Economics from Sydney University in 1971. He went on to make huge contributions to economic knowledge and understanding.

Renowned for his work in welfare economics, he has published more than two hundred refereed papers and three dozen books. In 2007, he received the Distinguished Fellow award, the highest recognition awarded by the Economic Society of Australia.

He also helped to establish mesoeconomics as a simplified method of analysis with both micro and macro elements. He also proposed welfare biology – which combines evolutionary biology and economics in the study of animal welfare – as a subject.

Ng, who is also Emeritus Professor at Monash University, joined NTU as the Albert Winsemius Chair Professor this January.

The Chair Professorship was established by NTU in 1997 as a tribute to Dr Albert Winsemius, the Dutch economist who acted as Singapore's economic advisor from the early 1960s to the 80s.

A man with a pernicious mind, Ng is widely read and has published on subjects other than economics. He has authored books and academic papers on philosophy, psychology, biology, mathematics and cosmology, and even published a martial arts novel.

"When you have ideas that are different or not in the books you read, or when you find mistakes, you want to make your views known," he said.

Ng maintains that at 70, his mind is as sharp as ever.

"I haven't thought about what I'll do (after his stint in NTU). By then I'll be 75, but I'll probably continue to write things for publication after retirement," he said with a booming laugh.